

Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

Summary of Purpose

The Knik River Public Use Area Management Plan (Plan) describes how the Alaska Department of Natural Resources (DNR) will manage state lands within the Knik River Public Use Area (PUA). The plan also provides specific guidance for the management of different uses in the PUA, particularly recreation. Since access within the PUA is such an important issue, the plan includes guidance on the management of present and future trails. It also outlines a process for addressing trail issues in the future in a more comprehensive manner. The plan also makes recommendations for facilities such as boat launches, parking areas and campsites. Draft regulations that apply to the planning area have recently gone through public review and these are summarized in Appendix C. The plan also proposes additional regulations that, if promulgated, will provide additional tools for managing the area. Once signed by the Commissioner, the plan becomes the policy and basis for decision making by DNR.

The Planning Area

The planning area includes the legal boundary established by statute for the PUA in addition to four parcels of land adjacent to the PUA. One of these parcels is owned by the state, while the remaining three are owned by the Matanuska Susitna Borough (MSB), the Mental Health Trust (MHT), and a private individual. See Map 1-1, pp. 1 - 3 for a depiction of the Plan boundary and identifies parcels. A Special Use Area (SUA) designation will be proposed for these identified parcels to provide consistent management with the adjacent PUA land. The SUA designation will only apply to lands owned by the state.

The Public Use Area

The PUA is located approximately 40 miles north and east of Anchorage on the western edge of the Chugach Mountains. The communities of Butte, Palmer, and Wasilla are located within 15 miles of the PUA. The planning area is mostly situated in the MSB and partially in the Municipality of Anchorage and the unorganized Valdez-Cordova Borough. It encompasses the drainages of Jim Creek, Metal and Friday creeks, and a portion of Hunter Creek and the main channel of the Knik River. The terminus of the Knik Glacier is also within the area and is a popular destination point for visitors to the upper Knik River valley. Another prominent feature and destination is the extensive lakes and wetlands located in the western portion of the PUA. The area is accessed by numerous trails, a few roads and the Knik River and associated shorelands.

The PUA consists of approximately 269,305 acres of primarily state-owned lands east of the City of Palmer. Other land ownerships within the PUA include federal, private, Native corporation, and MHT lands. Approximate acreages of land ownership are provided in the table below. See Map 1-2, *General Land Status*, pp. 1 - 5 for a graphic depiction of land status in and adjacent to the planning boundary.

Table 1-1: Land Ownership within the PUA

Ownership	State of Alaska	Federal	Native Corporation	Private	Mental Health Trust
Acreage (approximate)	208,261	58,145	962	1,489	448

Federal lands within the PUA have been selected by Eklutna Inc. consistent with the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971. The State has also selected these lands consistent with provisions of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980. Although adjudication of these selections by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has not been completed, it's likely that these lands will be conveyed to Eklutna Inc. rather than the state.

Management recommendations and policies developed through the plan will apply to state lands within the boundary of the PUA and the proposed SUA's. The plan does not apply to federal, Native corporation or other private lands.

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Map 1-1: Planning Area

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Map 1-2: General Land Status

Why the Draft Plan Was Developed

Situated within an hour's drive of almost 50 percent of Alaska's population, the Knik River valley has received increasing use as the populations of Anchorage and the Matanuska-Susitna Borough grow. Users are attracted to this area because of its fish and wildlife populations as well as the diversity of recreational opportunities. With this increasing use, there is a growing concern about public safety, impacts to fish, wildlife and their habitat and other natural resources and conflicts between users. Rapidly changing land status in the area has also raised concerns about the continued availability of access to public lands.

Unlawful uses have been increasing in the PUA. Underage drinking, indiscriminate shooting of firearms, destruction of private and public property, dumping large quantities of trash, and destruction of automobiles (and other structures) are a few of the unlawful activities occurring within the PUA regularly.

Unlawful activities are creating adverse impacts on the resources and uses within the Area. Wrecked and burned vehicles discharge petroleum and other hazardous chemicals onto the ground and into waterbodies. Off highway vehicle (OHV) use within anadromous waterbodies is occurring where that use is not authorized under state law. Multiple trespass structures such as cabins, tent platforms, and duck blinds have been constructed. Often these structures fall into disrepair and create litter throughout the area. Indiscriminate target shooting is becoming an increasing safety hazard for both users of the area as well as residents living along the borders of the PUA.

In the fall of 2005, meetings were held to discuss proposed legislation that would designate the Knik River valley and surrounding land as a Public Use Area. A final version of the bill was passed and signed into law on September 28, 2006 and was codified as AS 41.23.180-230. The legislation that established the PUA specified its purposes, provided direction for the management of uses and resources, and directed DNR to develop a plan and regulations to implement the plan. The underlying purpose of the management plan is to provide specificity to resource and use management within the PUA. Finally, the legislation granted enforcement authority to DNR and authorized it to develop penalties for the violation of laws and regulations that apply to the PUA.

How the Draft Plan Was Developed

This draft plan was developed following an extensive public involvement process with input from DNR management and a planning team. The planning team consisted of DNR, ADFG and MSB representatives.

Public meetings were held to educate and inform the public on the PUA and the planning process. The meetings allowed the public to identify issues, suggest how to address these issues, provide information about the area, and to exchange ideas with agency representatives. Meetings were held in Butte, Wasilla and Anchorage over the course of the last 18 months.

Concurrent with the public process, resource information was collected and reviewed. The complicated land status both within and adjacent to the area was researched. Discussions with DNR and other borough, state and federal agency staff contributed information regarding resources and impacts within and adjacent to the area. Planning team meetings provided agency representatives an opportunity to discuss issues and provide input into the identification of issues and development of alternatives and proposed management actions.

During this time, the Southcentral Regional Office within the Division of Mining, Land and Water hired staff to manage the area and develop regulations that addressed the issues that were of the greatest concern to the public. The Region also enlisted the help of the Department of Public Safety to patrol the area on a more frequent basis.

How the Draft Plan Will be Used

This plan has five primary functions:

- Provide overall guidance to management decisions that will have to be made for the area. Once adopted by the Commissioner, this plan will be the policy of DNR for the management of the area. Actions taken by DNR must be consistent with the plan.
- Recommend facilities to meet current and future needs of the public.
- Identify compatible and incompatible uses on which to base management guidelines and recommendations.
- Provide resource and use information to base future decisions.
- Provide the public with a meaningful opportunity to determine the future management of the PUA.

What the Plan Will or Will Not Do

The plan **will**:

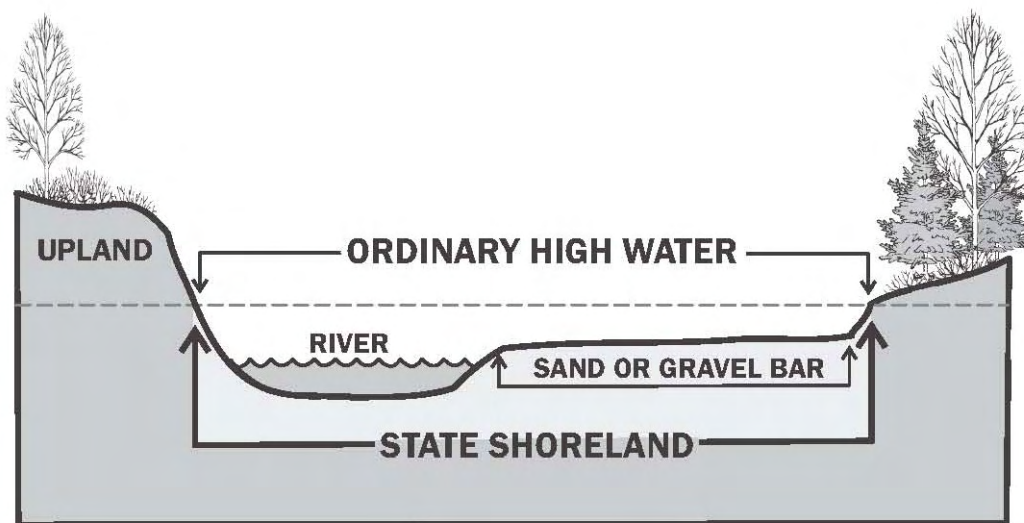
- Provide for the management of state land as provided in the implementing legislation (AS 41.23.180-230). State land within the PUA includes both uplands and shorelands. See Figure 1-1, *State Shorelands*, pp. 1 - 9.

- Supersede all current management direction now provided in the *Susitna Area Plan* and the *Prince William Sound Area Plan* where these area plans include areas within the PUA.
- Reclassify all state lands previously classified in area plans.
- Address the management of certain lands adjacent to the PUA. These lands are within the planning area, but are not within the boundary of the PUA.
- Address trails management and other natural resource protection measures in the PUA.
- Recommend parcels for acquisition by the state.
- Recommend lands for inclusion in the PUA.
- Provide an area to enhance non-motorized recreation in the area around Rippy Trail.
- Recommend shooting area designations at Maud Road and east of the Pavilion Parking area.
- Provide the basis for development of regulations necessary to implement the plan.

The plan **will not**:

- Apply to lands owned by private individuals, Native corporations, MSB, MHT, or federal lands other than those identified in the plan.
- Affect the authorities of ADFG to manage fish and game or ADFG harvest regulations.
- Address land topfiled by the state but selected by Eklutna Inc. except for the need for easements across these lands.

Figure 1-1: State Shorelands



Relationship of PUA Statutes to Other Statutes

The intent of the legislation that created the PUA is to perpetuate and enhance general public recreation and public enjoyment of fish and wildlife and to address the impacts of that use to fish and wildlife and their habitat within the PUA. All management actions by DNR must be consistent with Alaska Statutes at AS 41.23.180-230. In the absence of more specific guidance contained in AS 41.23.180-230, the other provisions of Title 38 (general resource management) apply. That is, state land is to be managed consistent with AS 41.23.180-230 and Title 38 except where the specific requirements of AS 41.23.180-230 apply. In addition, other provisions of state and federal laws and borough code may also apply to the area.

Relationship to Other Plans and Agreements

Portions of this planning area have been addressed in previous state, federal and Matanuska-Susitna Borough plans. State lands within the PUA have been addressed in previous DNR plans. A recent Bureau of Land Management plan addresses federally owned land within the PUA. In addition, the Matanuska-Susitna Borough has several plans that address lands within or adjacent to the PUA.

State Plans

Portions of the PUA planning area have been addressed in two previous DNR area plans. Adopted plans that overlap the PUA planning area include the *Susitna Area Plan* and the *Prince William Sound Area Plan*. Where the Knik River Public Use Area Management Plan overlaps with these older area plans, the management plan supersedes these plans and their classifications, policies, and guidelines.

Federal Plans and Documents

Two pertinent federal documents were reviewed prior to the development of the PUA Management Plan. These federal plans or documents are the *Ring of Fire Plan*, completed in 2006 by the Bureau of Land Management and the *Ecological Review of the Lake George National Natural Landmark* completed for the National Park Service in 1996.

Matanuska-Susitna Borough Plans

The MSB has developed a number of plans to address development within the Borough. Plans that address lands within the PUA include: the *Matanuska-Susitna Borough Comprehensive Plan* (adopted in 1970 and updated in 2005); *Asset Management Plan for Borough-owned Lands in the Butte Area* (2007); and, the *Matanuska-Susitna Borough Coastal Management Plan* (2006). These plans have been reviewed, and the policies within them have been taken under consideration when developing this plan.

1 **Agreements**

2 The *North Anchorage Land Agreement* (NALA) is an agreement between the State of
3 Alaska, Eklutna Inc. and the Municipality of Anchorage. NALA is recognized by the Bureau
4 of Land Management where it pertains to land title transfer of certain lands covered by the
5 agreement. Several parcels of land subject to NALA are within the planning area.
6 Management guidelines, policies and regulations in this plan do not apply to these parcels.
7 For information on lands managed subject to NALA, please see the signed agreement as
8 amended.